

With a president to inaugurate and a troubled economy, we can overlook the sacrifice of our troops in Afghanistan. This conflict, overshadowed by Iraq, often feels like the Forgotten War.

Last month, I became the first member of this House to serve in an Imminent Danger Area since 1942. Members of this House served in all of America's wars from the Revolution through World War II. The Defense Department's policy of 1943 blocked reservist-congressmen from serving in Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Kosovo or Iraq. Senator -- and Colonel -- Lindsay Graham broke through this barrier two years ago and I became the first member of the House to also serve.

While our country moved from a draftee military to an all-volunteer force, I think it is still important for as many Americans as possible to share the burden of our troops. Our military is strongest when it pulls into its ranks Americans from all races, creeds and colors -- especially from all walks of life. It is important for members of this House -- where the Constitution places the power to declare war -- to serve alongside our troops.

I voted for the deployment of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and was honored to be the first one of us to then join them in Afghanistan.

As a naval reserve intelligence officer, I deployed to southern Afghanistan to support NATO's International Security Assistance Force (or ISAF) at the headquarters of Regional Command (South). I served in the command of a Dutch Major General, Mart de Kruif, on the staff of his American Deputy for Stabilization, Brigadier General John Nicholson.

I can report to the House that the morale of our troops is high. For the Americans that I joined, they feel this is the right mission in the right place. Just because this effort is ten times harder than we first thought, it remains the place where we can best support the safety of the American people.

Our headquarters was located at Kandahar Airfield, known as "KAF." We were located just a few miles from Tarnak Farms where Osama bin Laden trained many Al Qaeda operatives. A few miles further away was the palace of Mullah Omar, the murderous leader of the Taliban that protected bin Laden.

We face some real challenges in Afghanistan. Our mission has stretched to seven years and can wear thin with the Afghan people. As we look at Senator Barack Obama becoming our Commander-in-Chief, it is important to look at what we have accomplished in Afghanistan, its differences from the Iraq mission and what remains to be done.

First, it is important to note that Afghanistan is not Iraq. Both countries are predominantly Muslim with over 25 million people. There the similarities end. Iraq is a country that has had a strong central government. Afghanistan has always had a certain lawlessness - even during the Soviet dictatorship. Iraq has an oil industry and a middle class. Afghanistan has neither. The Iraq mission was carried out by America and Britain. Few other allies helped. Afghanistan is home to a NATO mission with the large majority of troops from outside America. Finally, the insurgency in Iraq was sustained by Syria and radical Iranians. In Afghanistan, the principal

income of the Taliban is heroin, generating billions in profit.

Our troops accomplished a great deal in Afghanistan. We destroyed Al Qaeda's bases and then deposed the Taliban dictatorship that protected them. We organized elections and then protected a new democratically-elected government under Hamid Karzai. These missions were no small feat in a country that proved to be the graveyard of the Soviet military for a country that had seen no elections for three generations.

Since 2006, the mission has stalled as the Taliban morphed into a new and more deadly force. The tenants of Islam are generally anti-narcotic. The Taliban at first eradicated poppy and heroin production but then changed its practice.

Once they no longer had easy access to bin Laden or Saudi charity money, they went into the heroin business, big time. Today, they are more accurately described as the Narco-Taliban, backed by at least \$500 million annually in drug profits. Some of Afghanistan's wealthiest warlords are Taliban leaders who produce heroin to support jihad and terror against the elected Afghan government and nations of the West.

The Narco-Taliban are not evenly distributed across Afghanistan. They are concentrated in the Heroin Heartland of the Helmand River valley and the nearby city of Kandahar. There is a growing misconception that the war in Afghanistan is fiercest near Pakistan's border. While that may have been true last year, the key fighting this year is long the heroin river of Helmand in southern Afghanistan. The Afghan government and NATO are fighting pitched battles in their strategic rear where support and funding for the Taliban are greatest.

Our effort there is expensive in blood and treasure. The efforts of our allies is also expensive. While the US lost over 80 soldiers in our area, the Canadians lost over 90 and the British over 110. I cannot emphasize enough the dedication and professionalism of our troops and those of our allies. I personally served with British, Canadian, Dutch, Danish and Romanian soldiers. Along with our service men and women from the Army, Marines, Air Force and Navy, they are the most young, idealistic and dedicated people I have ever served with.

I worked with heroes who I admire and miss.

I thought that I might serve as a "Fobbit." A Fobbit is a person who works on a Forward Operating Base or FOB and never leaves its border. Thanks to my command, I spent a lot of time outside the wire in Kandahar, Geresk, Lashkar Gah and Qalat. It gave me a much greater understanding of the opportunities we have with NATO in Afghanistan.

With all of this effort, we should ask: what is at stake in Afghanistan? Should we pull out, stay put or double-down?

What is at stake is the safety of American families, especially in target cities like New York, Washington or Chicago. The dream of many Talib and foreign fighters is to depose the elected government and then move jihad back into the cities of Europe and America.

Most of the NATO troops I met remembered not just 9/11 but also the Madrid metro attack, London bus bombing and murder of intellectuals in Amsterdam. They believed as I do that it is best to face the Talib here with Afghan allies that know how to fight them best.

Should we keep the mission as it is today?

If we do, we risk a bloody stalemate that can protect the capital of Kabul but would surrender much of the countryside to the Talib. The Taliban now attacks girls who dare to enter school with acid and assassinated Afghanistan's only female police chief. We know who they are – brutal dictators that want to set society back to the 13th century. As Americans, we cannot go back to the 13th century - our culture embraces modernism. Most Afghans support that reform while many others simply want to be on the winning side. Our job is to show that the winning side is the elected government of Afghanistan.

Should we double-down?

NATO allies clearly believe that we should but are waiting for a call from the new American President. Our best allies, the UK, Spain, France and others, already plan to add to their commitment. Others, like Canada and the Netherlands, need to be asked before making the painful decision to hang in their. Most expect the US to send 20,000 more troops to attack the heroin production heartland of the Taliban. If this happens, we can expect some hard fighting and casualties. The Taliban cannot survive without its heroin money. If we succeed, then we will rip the financial engine out of the Taliban, securing a future for Central Asia that does not include terror.

What is our exit strategy?

Currently, the Afghan police and army are much smaller than their counter-parts in Iraq, a country of equal numbers. We need to double the size of Afghanistan's police and army to take this mission from NATO so that we can wind up our effort. It will take two to three years to accomplish this - which is why our troops are needed now.

I want to thank the men and women that I served with. Our Dutch allies send us General de Kruif and British allies sent us Brigadier General Hook of the Royal Marine Commandos. I want to especially thank the men I served most closely with - Majors Will Daniel and Fred Tanner of the US Army. I think of them and their dedication each day.

I especially want to thank my boss, Brigadier General John Nicholson, USA. I count myself lucky at this later stage in my life to have served, briefly, with such an inspirational leader. To the moms and dads of this country, I would say that if you son or daughter serves in southern Afghanistan, they will work under one of the most able military leaders that I have ever met.

As we leave Iraq, it is likely that Afghanistan will no longer be the Forgotten War. Members of this House should take note of what our troops have already accomplished there and what remains to be done.

For my part, I am honored to have served there and will be the voice of the troops for as long as

we have Americans stationed in that land far above the Khyber Pass.